

McElroy Octagon House
2645 Gough Street
San Francisco, California

HABS No. CAL-1223

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
San Francisco, California

PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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OCTAGON HOUSE

San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

ADDRESS: 2645 Gough Street

OWNER: The National Society of Colonial Dames of America
Resident in California

OCCUPANT: Same

USE: Society Headquarters and Museum

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This octagonal house was constructed ca. 1860-1861 with plain concrete walls surfaced with "V" groove redwood rustic siding, and with wood quoins at the angles and modified Classical Revival cornice and entrance details. Built for William C. McElroy, it is now owned by the National Society of Colonial Dames of America Resident in California. The building is one of two remaining houses in San Francisco built on the octagon plan, which became popular in mid-19th century America.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The exact date of construction of this building, at its original location (given as 2618 in the San Francisco Directories of the 19th and early 20th century) across the street from the present site, is still not entirely clear. William C. McElroy's amusing letter to posterity, of July 14th, 1861--found in a tin box in the wall under the stairs leading to the "captain's walk"--provides a terminus ante quem. Newspapers in the tin box are dated 1860 and 1861. Various writers have assigned a date as early as 1857, apparently on unsubstantiated evidence. The property was not acquired until 1859; on December 27th of that year, Harriet S. McElroy bought it from Charles H. and Harry O. Gough. Harriet S. McElroy had come to San Francisco

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in 1849; a native of Lancaster, Pa., her maiden name was Shober. She was born in 1821, and is said to have been the housekeeper of the first Hotel St. Francis on Dupont Street, soon after her arrival in San Francisco. William C. McElroy was born in 1819 and came to San Francisco in 1851. He was a miller by trade. The McElroys had one daughter, Emma Eliza, (later more often called Emma L., for Emma Liza) who was nine in 1861. A nephew, Samuel A. Wolfe, lived with the family for a time, in their new "octigon" house (as it is spelled in McElroy's letter of July 14th; this does not give details of construction, but specifically refers to a "privet" residence"). 1

Emma L. McElroy became a teacher at Broadway Primary School, and later married a Mr. Tallman; she is listed as his widow in Directories of the 1880's. On April 4th, 1889, she married Abraham P. Van Duzer, a San Francisco attorney; they went to live at his residence, 822 Guerrero Street. Harriet McElroy (widowed about 1871) joined her daughter and her new husband on Guerrero Street--presumably after the marriage in 1889. From this time, various new occupants, renting or leasing the octagon house, are listed in the Directories. Daniel O'Connell, well known poet, lived here from 1889 to about 1893; Fiorenzo Cavagnaro and his family occupied the premises about 1893. Cavagnaro died about 1905; but the widow, Magdalen, is listed here until a year after the great earthquake and fire of 1906. (The house suffered serious damage from the earthquake, but the fire was stopped east of the property.) Harriet S. McElroy had deeded the property to Emma L. Van Duzer on August 17th, 1896; Mrs. McElroy died a few years later. At this period the site is recorded as a large somewhat irregular lot at the northeast corner of Gough and Green, with 206 feet, 3 inches on Gough and 137 feet, 6 inches on Green; a miniscule extension of 2 feet, 6 inches went down to Union (formerly Presidio Road), at some remove from the corner of Union and Gough. However, in 1908 when properties were re-recorded after destruction of most records in the fire of 1906, Judge James Trout of the Superior Court issued a decree to Mrs. Van Duzer for a somewhat different property. This was essentially a southeast corner lot at Gough and Union, with no frontage on Green Street; with minor irregularities it consisted of 220 feet on Gough and 92 feet, 6 inches on Union.

Mrs. Van Duzer died on April 12, 1909 and she willed the property to Kate Virginia Van Duzer (possibly a daughter or step-daughter). At this time, the property records indicate the same Union Street frontage but a reduction to 145 feet, 9 inches on Gough, south of the corner at Union. Kate Virginia Van Duzer sold to Eleanor Whelan on October 21, 1923--the property configuration and dimensions remaining

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the same. Eleanor Whelan sold to Charles J. U. Koenig on February 8, 1924. Koenig deeded the property to the Pacific Gas and Electric Company on September 23, 1924. Various quasi-legendary stories have been written about later occupants of the house (renters probably), as in Robert O'Brien's Riptides columns in San Francisco Chronicles of the 1940's (where he speaks of spinster sisters named Riley). The house was empty from 1949 to 1952; windows were broken and the interior vandalized. The property was about to be sold to the highest bidder, for an estimated \$20,000, when the sale was called off. The Colonial Dames acquired the house only for a token payment of \$1.00 and the promise to remove it from the original site. The property was then sold to Michael Desiano and his wife, with small portions going to other interested buyers. 2

The wealthy Allyne sisters of 2609 Gough Street, northwest corner of Green Street, owned all of the west side of the block between Union and Green. They were also Colonial Dames. In 1952 they gave the Dames a sixty foot lot, north and adjacent to their own home, and the derelict octagonal house was moved from the east side of the street across to the new location on the west side. (The Allyne sisters later gave the Dames the lot at the southwest corner of Gough and Union to enhance the house's setting.)

The Dames had approximately \$16,000 in reserve funds. Much more was needed to accomplish the moving of the house, the initial revisions and restoration. Mrs. Norman Livermore headed the first fund raising drive. When some \$20,000 were on hand (including the original reserve), a \$10,000 mortgage was placed on the property. Warren Perry, FAIA, formerly Chairman, Department of Architecture, University of California at Berkeley, was retained as architect. The house was ready for its new use in April of 1953. (A cornerstone was laid on April 7th and the building was used for the annual meeting that same day.)

Funds continued to come in and The Society contributed as much as possible each month from its general fund but, when some thousands were yet needed to pay off the mortgage, receipts began to slow down. Mrs. Lindley Hoffman Miller, President when Octagon House was acquired, felt something must be done to raise the balance required to wipe out the debt. At a meeting in 1955, she offered to contribute \$1,000, personally, if the remaining amount could be raised before the 1956 Annual Meeting. With this spur, the balance was raised and at the April 1956 Annual Meeting, there was a gala mortgage-burning celebration. An ivory "peace button", signifying no debt on the property, was placed on the newel post. The \$30,000 job was at last accomplished.

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Octagon House is, at present, the only known Museum in the State devoted to The Colonial Period. Its notable collection of furniture and decorative arts (largely American of the 1800 era) is rare in California. A library on the second floor contains many valuable volumes, including fine genealogical registers, and has important scrap books covering the history of the house and its modifications. Octagon House is used for meetings of the Society and for social functions. It is open to the public from one until four P.M., on the first Sunday and the second and fourth Thursdays of each month. Copies of the letter written by William C. McElroy, paper models of the house and other materials are available at the door.

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. After a brief preliminary about the McElroys and the house, the letter discusses such matters as the Civil War, trans-continental transportation, the growth of San Francisco, the Chinese in California, wages of workmen, property values, etc.
2. Much of the biographical and historical data, as well as complicated chain of title of the property recorded here, was obtained from research made by Colonel and Mrs. H. H. Ashley (Mrs. Ashley occupying the office of President of the Colonial Dames in California)--based on study of San Francisco Directories and various legal records. There is no Harriet McElroy listed in the Directories before her widowhood. William C. McElroy had his dwelling at Union and Powell Street in the 1860 Directory. In 1861, he is listed at the southeast corner of Union and Gough, in the new octagonal house. The house, incidentally, was never at the corner proper but was located at a point south of the corner on a slight eminence. The entrance was on the northwest face, with a stair leading up from the street below. This placement may account for the disparities in property siting outlined in the text here, permitting possible sale of and purchase of differing amounts of frontage on Union and Gough at different periods without disturbing the house's site.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

Books:

- Baird, Joseph A. Jr., Time's Wondrous Changes: San Francisco Architecture, 1776-1915, San Francisco, California, California Historical Society, 1962, pp. 14, 46.
Benet, James, San Francisco and the Bay Region, New York, Random House, 1963, p. 142.
Fowler, Orson, A Home for All, New York, Fowlers and Wells, 1848; see later editions also.
San Francisco Directories for 1860 and 1861.

Brochures:

Four page brochure, prepared by the National Society of Colonial Dames Resident in California; available at Octagon House; cover photograph with a brief history of the house and its collections, as well as a statement of the aims of Dames.

Letters:

- Ray W. Taylor to Miss Olive Craig, December 15, 1952 (contains historical information about purchase of land and date of construction).
Warren Perry to Charles Pope, November 29, 1957.

Newspapers and Periodicals:

- San Francisco Call Bulletin, November 2, 1953.
San Francisco Chronicle, August 7, 1946 (Robert O'Brien's Riptides column, part of two part story; facts inaccurate).
San Francisco Chronicle, March 30, 1953 (article on the contents of the concealed tin box).
San Francisco Examiner, October 29, 1952.

Original Papers:

Manuscript letter by William C. McElroy, dated July 14, 1861, various old newspapers of 1860 and 1861, and photographs (found in the tin box hidden in a wall under the stair leading to the "captain's walk").

Scrapbooks, Etc:

- Library of Octagon House: scrapbooks on the building.
Research of Colonel and Mrs. H. H. Ashley in legal documents and San Francisco Directories

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ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

EXTERIOR

This house (approximately sixteen feet on a side and approximately twenty two feet to the top of the cornice) was constructed with plain concrete walls (gravel, lime and sand), with exterior redwood siding. The upper and lower edges of the eight inch horizontal siding are beveled or chamfered to provide a more grooved, or quasi-rusticated, appearance to the exterior. Wooden quoins at the corners of the octagon continue the masonry implications of the siding. A high wooden cornice, with abbreviated frieze and dentil course, crowns the structure. The slightly inclined roof, an octagonal hipped type, leads to an octagonal cupola - which has a cornice and dentil course similar to that of the house proper, although reduced in scale. Both cornices have wooden brackets at the corners of the octagons. Windows are paired in each story and each face; they are all double-hung, with paneled moldings framing each window. A modified Classical Revival portico (moved from its original corner location) provides protection for the new entrance on the east face of the house; two squared and chamfered Tuscan pillars of wood support the portico's roof at the east, and similar pilasters are attached to the house under the western edge of the roof. The roof has a plain frieze, dentil course and high wooden cornice. The house is now painted gray, with white trim, quoins, pillars, pilasters, friezes, cornices and window frames. Modern wooden stairs lead down from the north and south sides of the portico to masonry walks connecting with the Gough Street sidewalk; these stairs have a banister of simple modern intersecting lozenge pattern of wood bracing under the handrail.

Stylistically, the house may be called modified Classical Revival, although it is clearly not of temple-form nor is it directly related to the ambitious Classical Revival houses of the East and Old South. Certain features are Georgian (American Baroque) - the staggered quoining and the cupola at the top of the house. The portico is the only definite Classical Revival feature, and it is very simple and without a pediment. The paneled window trim links the house to its more fashionable contemporaries in the Italianate manner. The brackets in the cornices are discreet symptoms of building changes from Classical Revival to later fashions of 1850's and 1860's. The shape was inspired by Orson Fowler's popular book, A Home for All, 1848 ff.; Fowler claimed various advantages for octagonal houses, and the vogue swept the nation in the 1850's. One progressive material

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feature of the Fowler-inspired octagons was the use of simple concrete walls. A plan in a later edition (last chapter) of the book was apparently the source for this building; it is labeled "the best plan of all".

INTERIOR

The major plan revision of the house, under Warren Perry's direction, was to change from four small rooms with four triangles (entrance at corner, in one of the triangles), to an expanded space on the first floor, and an entrance in the east side of the building. The fine original central staircase was structurally unsound; the present staircase at the west of the new large room on the first floor was put together with the original newel post, balusters found in a storeroom of the adjacent Allyne house, and a new handrail. The staircase rises west to a landing, then continues with a longer flight to another landing, and turns back to the east to meet the second floor central hall. (The original room at the west on the second floor was modified to make a new stair hall.) The walls of the first floor interior have been given a more Georgian treatment in the renovation, with paneling and architectural elements for cupboards, etc., providing a more appropriate setting for the present furnishings. A new kitchen in the northwest corner of the first floor (the original triangular space here was augmented with another triangle to make a square room) services luncheons and receptions; this kitchen has thus changed not only the interior at this point but the exterior as well with its square projection of the augmented space. Various service and other storage areas are located in the other triangles of the first floor.

The second floor is relatively unchanged in architectural character. From the central hall, two rooms continue the display of fine period furnishings seen on the first floor. One (at the south) has been fitted up as a bedroom; the other (at the east) is a library. A room with a new bath occupies the north side of the second floor, while the revised staircase rises into what was the fourth square room on this floor. Just south of the central hall, a narrow stairway (enclosed in the walls) rises to the "captain's walk" under the cupola; from the stairway, access to the roof is possible, also. The floors throughout the house are of oak in the present revision; draperies and floor coverings are appropriate to the period interiors. (Scalamandre of New York supplied the fabrics for some of the furniture, and for the draperies.)

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The interesting and carefully selected collection of old pieces here have been assembled from existing holdings of the Dames (formerly at the de Young Memorial Museum), and other gifts. The installation was under the direction of Louis Zannon of the Neel D. Parker firm of interior decorators. Other collections of the Dames, such as the silver and manuscripts, await proper display facilities. Full details of the history of the furnishings are available at Octagon House.

Prepared by,

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